

# THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF VEGAS

By Cdr. Russell McLachlan

The desert heat and sun instantly hit me as I stepped out of the Hawkeye. I was joining my squadron during the middle of what already had become a challenging detachment: the famous Red Flag exercise at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nev.

**T**he next day of the exercise was a normal, two-sortie fly day for the det but would be a planning day for me. I would lead the command and control (C2) effort for the following day's evening mission. I quickly realized how unfamiliar I was with the Nellis range and was awed

with the enormity of the air-tasking order our E-2C crews faced for each event. I was way behind the knowledge level of aircrew that had been involved with the initial strikes the previous week, but I was confident I could catch up.

We taxied with the usual Baja callsign, launched into the clear desert night, and transited north through the corridor to the Elgin airspace. I was as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs as I watched the amassing number of aircraft stack up in holding: F-15s, F-16s, C-17s, helos, tankers, AWACS, B-1s, and Tornados. You name it, they were all playing tonight. The Hawkeye picture was decent but ugly, with our track filled by aircraft tanking and waiting for their push times.

"Flight, let's lean east," I declared as I saw the increasing spillouts into the AWACS-tanker-E-2 station. The AWACS and tankers were fragged for the same airspace. The squadron had grown comfortable with the 2,000-foot altitude separation between Baja and the tanker with his dozen chicks in tow; I hadn't yet reached that comfort level. But, it was game time, and I turned my attention 120 miles west as the offensive counter air (OCA) pushed out ahead of the strike package. It was a good night for flying, and, while we expected lots of dead bogeys within the hour, something more awaited us.

The strikers pushed, and the comm nets became chaotic with the chatter of threat calls and shots down range. The first unusual transmission was from Majic, the British AWACS fragged as the backup controllers.

"Baja. Majic. Reaper 1 flight [*flight of two B-1s*] 10 miles west, 27,000."

I quickly went back to ownship on my screen for a glance.

"Radar contact," I replied.

Seemingly, there was no change to the picture; this was just your usual huge gaggle of strikers, waiting patiently for their chance in the fight.

Back to the strike control. What I did not see was the Reaper flight continue beyond their bomber track into our airspace only 500 feet above.

The next call was on guard. "Reaper. Baja. Co-altitude in Elgin!"

Flying at 27,500 feet, the top of their block of 27,000 to 28,000 feet, the B-1 lead immediately stepped down 500 feet, putting the two aircraft co-altitude with ours. Having just started a turn to the south, I called for the flight to level the wings in an effort to be predictable. There was nothing more for me to do; the damage had been done. How could I have been so complacent and trusting?

I held my breath and waited. Reaper 1 screamed across the windscreen.

*Then, an incredible explosion brightened the dark ranges north of the sparkling strip of Las Vegas, I imagined. The fire and falling debris rained down like a scene in a black-and-white war movie.*


But, back to reality. Reaper 2 crossed overhead within 200 feet of the E-2 cockpit, requiring the pilots to unload and drop approximately 1,000 feet. After making sure the situation was under control, the pilots initiated a slow, climbing turn back to mission altitude and away from future close encounters.

Anything to learn? Oh yeah.

I speak often about accountability to my junior officers and enlisted men and women, namely in the form of a postulate: To whom much is given, much is required. What was I given? Sitting in the Navy's premier C2 platform, I failed to help my pilots keep us out of harm's way. I can't just blame the B-1 crews. They must depend on their VFR lookout contracts only. One of my mission contracts was to use my radar and other sensors as a strong backup—a crew concept. Simply put, I failed. Brief your contracts and keep them.

Never underestimate the need for good mission planning. The first slice of Swiss cheese was laid out when the strike commander put the B-1s' holding track at the same altitude block as us. Whether or not they again would fly out of their track, they were planned 10,000 feet lower for the next evening's mission. Make sure the design is solid. Whether it is your first mission or 10th, give the plan a good look, and do not hesitate to offer your input. "I told you so," doesn't usually make it to the quote log or the aviator's eulogy. Say something before the situation happens.

The worst ever CRM was displayed by yours truly. I was extremely uncomfortable with the traffic, yet briefed and executed the standard stationing instead of going with my gut feeling. If I had said out loud, "I guess this is the only place to station. After all, I'm the new guy in this exercise," I would have been laughed out of the room. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't, so say something.

I later lay motionless in the darkness of my hotel room. I could not rest as the scene played over and over in my mind. We had cheated death. I am thankful I'm here to tell the story and didn't actually become another "bright light" in Vegas. Throw this one out at your next SAD CLAM review. 

Cdr. McLachlan flies with VAW-121.